

Copyright 1994 South Bend Tribune Corporation  
South Bend Tribune (Indiana)

November 16, 1994, Wednesday, MICHIGAN

SECTION: LOCAL/AREA, Pg. B1

LENGTH: 540 words

HEADLINE: TRIBE DENIES IT DECEIVED CONGRESSMEN ON GAMING

BYLINE: LOUIS MUMFORD Tribune Staff Writer

BODY: NILES - If area Congressmen Fred Upton and Tim Roemer believe the Pokagon Band of Potawatomi Indians tried to deceive them regarding their recently expressed interest in a Michiana area gambling casino, they're sadly mistaken, tribal counsel John Low said Tuesday.

"We never had any desire to deceive Mr. Roemer or Mr. Upton," Low said. "Until we received federal recognition, we were of little or no interest to any (gaming) investment groups. Then preliminary contacts (from the investment groups) educated us to the feasibility and size this project could be to both a community and the band."

Low's comments were in reaction to statements by the congressmen, who called the Pokagons' overwhelming vote in favor of pursuit of a Michiana casino "deeply troubling." The vote Saturday by about 240 members of the band was unanimous.

Upton and Roemer chastised the Pokagons for pursuing a casino. The congressmen argued that when the band approached them about seeking federal recognition, which is necessary for a tribe to launch a gaming enterprise on its reservation, it said a gambling casino wasn't in its plans.

Upton said that later, when the federal recognition legislation was on the House floor, he heard that gaming investment groups had contacted the band. He said when he once again contacted tribal leaders asking if gaming was a consideration, they again argued it wasn't.

"In fact, during the floor debate, some of our House colleagues voiced their belief that your tribe was seeking federal recognition in order to develop gaming," they said in a joint statement. "We vehemently denied these claims, placing our own reputations and credibility on the line."

Now that the tribe has turned its attention toward gaming, Upton and Roemer have vowed to work against such an enterprise.

They admitted, however, that the final say will come not from them but either Indiana Gov. Evan Bayh or Michigan Gov. John Engler, depending on where the casino would be located. Also, Secretary of Interior Bruce Babbitt would have to designate land in "trust" for a casino.

Low reiterated that gaming wasn't in the tribe's plans when it embarked on the federal recognition process. "We didn't go into this to be Pokagon Casinos Inc.," he said.

"When the membership (the 240 tribal members at Saturday's referendum) gives a unanimous vote, we can't ignore that mandate either," he said.

Low emphasized that every other federally-recognized tribe in Michigan is

involved in some type of gaming operation. Also, he said both Indiana and Michigan have state lotteries, Indiana has passed legislation permitting riverboat gambling and both the Republican and Democratic political parties even utilize bingo as a fund-raising activity.

"Why can't we have it (gambling) as a legitimate form of economic development?" he asked.

Low said he sees nothing wrong with a casino as a legitimate form of development. He added he doesn't believe it's fair for Upton and Roemer to take their anti-gambling attitudes out on the Pokagons.

"If they want to legislate morality in southwestern Michigan and northern Indiana, fine. But it's confusing if they try to legislate the morality of the Pokagons and limit it just to us," he said.

LOAD-DATE: November 24, 1998, Tuesday